**Commitment To Owning Suri Alpacas**

Committing to the care of a Suri alpaca should be thoroughly thought out, just as it is for a dog, cat, or any livestock. The discussion should include all members of the family that might be involved at any time in the animals’ care. Unless you have similar livestock such as llamas, sheep, or goats, alpacas need to have another alpaca for company. They should never be kept alone. It is strongly recommended that you have 3 or 4 because alpacas are herd animals that do best with other alpacas. Males and females should be kept separately, although gelded males can sometimes be kept with females.

Minimally, all livestock require shelter from inclement weather, daily feeding, fresh water, and daily inspection to be certain that they are in good form. Other maintenance such as parasite prevention, toenail trimming, and shearing are required less frequently. Just like a child or pet, their needs must be met 365 days a year. Those needs do not go away for holidays, vacations, or owner illness.

Suris require adequate space and shelter that is safe and protects them from weather and predators. It is customary for alpaca owners, particularly those that are keeping their alpacas in smaller areas, to regularly rake or shovel their manure. This helps with the control of parasites and odor.

Suri alpacas bring many years of enjoyment to their owners. Unlike many other livestock projects, most alpacas are kept for their entire natural lives, so it is important to plan for expenses that might be associated with any pet or livestock for its lifetime. With a lifespan that can reach up to 20 years or more, it is important for the family to consider that children grow up and their interests change.  Will the family still want to be involved in caring for a Suri alpaca for years to come?

**Own or Lease?**

If you are considering alpacas as an activity for your children, there are two options available. Obviously, ownership is one of these and commands a longstanding commitment as well as adequate shelter, space and fencing. You can also purchase and alpaca and board or agist it at a farm or ranch. Another wonderful way of introducing a child to alpacas is by leasing an alpaca.

In the leasing arrangement, the alpaca may be leased and taken home to the family’s acreage, or it may remain on the leasing farm where its daily care is overseen by the owners. Many owners are grateful for this second arrangement for the youth can assist them on a regular basis in caring for and training their alpacas. There are numerous ways to structure a lease, from the child that only works with the animals and does not help with their daily care, to a lease where the child is fully involved and is responsible for feeding, watering, and cleaning up after their alpaca daily as if it were their own.

**Finding a Mentor**

Many alpaca owners have no experience owning and caring for livestock . Taking the leap into owning alpacas will be safer if you have a mentor to help provide counsel should you need some advice. Often that might be the person you purchase your alpaca from, but it could be a farm that is closer or more willing to provide help to a new owner. A mentor can help to put a new owner in touch with resources such as veterinarians, transporters, shearers, or contractors for building fence. They can walk you through trimming nails, shearing day, skirting fleeces, tell you the best place to get hay or feed, or help with the birth of cria.

**Choosing An Alpaca To Purchase**

If you are ready to own an alpaca, there are several things to consider before choosing an alpaca to own.

* **What Will the Alpaca Be Used For (fiber, fun, or breeding stock)?** One of the wonderful things about alpacas is that they offer so many different experiences to take advantage of. They are intelligent animals that can be trained to lead and go through an obstacle course or even carry a pack. Their fiber can be used to make clothing, accessories, household furnishings, and artwork. Occasionally, they serve as guardian animals used to protect flocks of sheep. In many countries and to a much smaller extent in North America, their meat and hides are utilized.
* **Temperament:** Alpaca temperament varies from one animal to the next. Some of the temperament appears to be inherited from parents and a certain percentage is attributable to how the alpaca has been raised. Each alpaca has its own personality and if children are to be working with an alpaca, it is wise to choose one that is calmer and more cooperative. Like other animals it is important to build a good relationship based on trust. Even the alpaca that is initially shy and fearful can become a good partner for the child that is patient, kind, and willing to regularly work with the alpaca to increase its skill and confidence. It is wise to choose a calmer alpaca for the less experienced or smaller child.
* **Assessing the Fleece Characteristics:** If you are interested in having your alpaca so that you can use its fleece for fiber arts, you will want to pay close attention to the quality of the fleece. It would be wise to seek input from someone who has some expertise in alpaca fleece before making your purchase. You might request a fiber test called a histogram to help with your decision.
* **Assessing Conformation:** Selecting an alpaca with correct conformation is important to be certain that your new alpaca will live a long, healthy and comfortable life. If you are choosing an alpaca to breed, be certain that it is as correctly conformed as possible so that the cria it produces are more likely to be sound.
* **Consider a Veterinary Examination:** The decision to purchase livestock is a big one and you certainly do not want to purchase an alpaca if it already has problems. Having a veterinarian examine a potential purchase might be money well spent, especially if your alpaca is going to be used for breeding. These are called pre-purchase exams.
* **Why is Registration Important?** The Alpaca Owners Association (AOA) is responsible for maintaining a registry data base for alpacas in North America. The AOA registry (previously the ARI Registry) is an accumulation of information about all the alpacas in that registry. One obvious and important purpose is to maintain records that show the lineage of registered alpacas on forms called Pedigrees. The AOA registry is different from many other livestock registries because its rules demand that the parents of the baby alpaca (cria) be validated through special DNA blood testing. This proves that the mother and father of an alpaca are exactly who they are supposed to be.

When breeding alpacas, owners usually choose which male and female to breed together to improve the fleece and conformation (body structure) of the next generation. Without an accurate registry, the breeder cannot be as certain that an alpaca’s parents are who they think they are. There have been many incidents where it has been discovered that a cria’s (baby alpaca) parent (typically the sire) is different from who the owners initially thought. These incidents have proven the importance of DNA validation.

AOA also runs the largest alpaca show system in the world. Individuals come from all over the world to train to become AOA Certified Alpaca Judges. Only alpacas that are registered with AOA can compete in AOA shows. Youth may participate in county fair or non-AOA shows with unregistered alpacas, but many youth clubs enjoy competing in both. AOA tracks the show winnings of alpacas when they compete in AOA shows and places that information in the records for that alpaca with their pedigree.

Registering alpacas increases the value of that animal. Only alpacas that are born to AOA registered alpacas, validated by DNA testing can be registered by AOA. If a child or their family are considering breeding alpacas or showing in AOA shows, it is best to use registered alpacas.

**Contracts**

Contracts are legal documents that are agreed upon by at least 2 people or businesses. There are many different types of contracts that exist in the alpaca industry. A contract helps to define exactly what each individual is obligated to in terms of payments or work, so that everyone understands the expectations they have of each other.

* **Purchasing Contract:** This is simply an agreement that defines who is selling, who is buying, which alpaca(s) is being bought, how much is to be paid, and when and how the payment(s) is to be made.
* **Breeding Contract:** Sometimes people choose to breed their alpaca to someone else’s alpaca. This contract defines the price of the breeding, who is responsible for veterinary bills associated with the breeding (if there are any), who is responsible for transportation, and if there is board to be paid. Often breeding contracts will include certain guarantees, such as a live birth of the cria.
* **Boarding or Agisting (another word for boarding) Contract:** Sometimes an alpaca owner is unable to have their alpaca stay with them and need it to live someplace else. In this case it is wise to have a boarding or agisting contract developed for the alpaca owner and the farm or ranch owner who will take care of the animal for them. This contract will define the price of such care and what might be included in that board, such as shots to prevent certain parasites, shearing, birthing fees, veterinary fees, and when to call the veterinarian.
* **Leasing Contract:** Often alpacas used by youth for showing or club projects are leased from alpaca farms/ranches. These contracts define the fees and expectations of the alpaca owners and the youth. The lease may be to take the alpaca to the youth’s farm for a specified amount of time, or the alpaca may remain on the owners’ farm. They may specify many things such as the child is to work at the owner’s farm a certain number of hours per week, that the youth is responsible for the care and upkeep of the alpaca including veterinary expenses, or that the owners will be responsible for transporting alpacas, etc.

Because there is so much variation in the arrangements made to allow young people to work with alpacas, it is best if everyone involved knows exactly what is expected to avoid any potential for any misunderstandings.

**Transporting**

Because alpacas are smaller in stature than some livestock, transporting them does not necessarily require a livestock trailer. When transporting, it is important to consider the safety of the alpacas as well as their transporters.

There are professionals who transport alpacas in all parts and to all parts of the country. They charge a fee for their service and have special requirements, such as veterinary evaluations to be certain the alpaca is healthy and will not spread a contagious disease to the other alpacas on the trailer.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides the following “Golden Rules” for transporting alternative livestock such as alpacas:

* Ensure that only healthy animals are transported.
* Minimize contact of your animals with other livestock and wildlife.
* Consult your veterinarian.
* Comply with state and federal regulations regarding:
	+ the transportation of your animals;
	+ health certificates and permits;
	+ ventilation, temperature, and environmental requirements;
	+ nutritional requirements;
	+ shipping and holding space and other welfare requirements.

Every state has very specific rules about transporting animals into that state. A link to the website that lists these regulations can be found on the AOA website under “SHOW”. The USDA website is
[www.aphis.usda.gov/import\_export/animals/animal\_import/animal\_imports\_states.shtml](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/wps/portal/aphis/ourfocus/importexport)

Livestock being taken from one state to another are required to be examined and certified healthy by a licensed veterinarian before the trip begins. Travelling across state lines requires that you have paperwork signed by a veterinarian, so before travelling, be sure you have plenty of time to schedule the veterinarian appointment and acquire these “Vet Papers”. Usually owners can transport alpacas within their state without any need for papers or veterinary inspections. However, the venue or event that you are going to take your alpaca to may have special requirements of its own, even if it is occurring the same state you alpacas live.

Alpacas can be transported in horse and livestock trailers, or even passenger vehicles when special precautions are taken. Many breeders have used cargo vans, SUVs, or mini vans. Obviously, livestock trailers are a great choice because the driver will not be bothered when alpacas need to urinate or defecate. They are also built for easy loading and unloading.

Using vans or SUVs to move alpacas requires some added care. First and foremost, there should be a sturdy barrier that prevents the alpacas from coming into the front seat. It is also recommended that some type of tarp or other protection be placed under the alpacas to prevent urine or manure from soiling the vehicle. Loading alpacas onto trailers with a ramp, or small step is relatively easy, but getting them into a taller vehicle can be a challenge that will require additional help or ingenuity.

Regardless of the method you choose to transport, it is important to consider ventilation for adequate cool, fresh air in the warmer months, and protection from cold or damp weather in the winter months. If the distance is greater than an hour from home, it would be good to have fresh water available, and hay if the trip will last for longer than a couple of hours. Be prepared to cope with delays from traffic or road construction. Have properly fitting halters and leads for each alpaca in case it is necessary to have them exit the trailer or vehicle along your route.

Always carry the contact information for your destination with you as well as an accurate and detailed map, for you may find that cellular/GPS service is not available along your route.